

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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NO MAN WHO LOOKS BACK IS FIT FOR THE KINGDOM

Luke 9:62

This is what the Lord Jesus declares in Luke 9:62.

Luke 9:62. But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Discipleship

In this verse, the Lord Jesus tells us very clearly that it is possible for a person to be unfit for the kingdom of God, even though he puts his hand to the plow. What does He mean by that?

Let's look at this passage closely. Jesus says these words after a man came to Him. This would-be disciple makes this promise in v. 61. *Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.* We studied the rest of this passage, from v. 57 to v. 62, in our previous lesson but we did not pay particular attention to v. 62. This is what we are going to do in this lesson.

Here in v. 62, the Lord Jesus teaches us that the only kind of person who is fit for the kingdom of God does two things: he puts his hand to the plow (which is the basic condition) and he doesn't look back.

The first point we observe is the universal application of this verse. 'No one. No man. Any man who puts his hand to the plow.' This word 'no one' is very often used in the Lord's teaching to introduce a general principle that applies to any person. Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back, no matter whether he is a pastor, a missionary, a Sunday school teacher, any disciple of Christ, if he puts his hand to the plow and he looks back, he will thereby prove that he is not fit for the kingdom of God. What this 'not fit for the kingdom of God' means, we shall see later in this lesson.

Enrolled in God's service

The second thing to notice is this. Look at the words 'putting the hand to the plow.' These words tell us why we become a disciple of Jesus. Some people seem to have the understanding that becoming a Christian is simply a matter of having a certain religion that you embrace and that you use to comfort your heart. They like Christianity because it gives them a kind of moral and emotional support. Well, the word of God certainly gives us some support and it can certainly comfort our heart. But that is not the essence of Christianity. Being called to be a Christian is to be called to put your hand to the plow. And what does it mean to plow? To plow is to work the land. So to put the hand to the plow is to serve God.

The follower of Christ should understand that being a Christian is to be called into God's service. It means to serve God. Now, we are not talking about being a pastor or a missionary or any kind of full-time ministry. The Lord Jesus is simply saying that no matter what kind of Christian you are, no matter how young you are in Christ or how old you are in Christ, every Christian should be active in God's service. He does not stay idle. Being a member of a church does not make you a Christian. A person shows that he is a Christian when he puts his hand to God's plow. He is active for God. He lives daily for God. The person who makes the decision to follow Jesus has committed his life to God's service by plowing His field.

The notion of service behind this agricultural picture is found in many places in the NT. For example, in Luke 17:7, the Christian is spoken of as a servant of God plowing the field. *And which of you, having a servant **plowing** or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? We ought to do the things that the Lord has commanded us.* This is illustrated by the picture of a servant plowing or tending sheep. In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul says, *I **planted**, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.* Paul compares the establishment of a church to the planting of grains and the watering of the field. We are all God's workers who are farming in His field. This is the point of putting the hand to the plow.

A sacrificial life

Now, putting the hand to the plow involves certain things, just like becoming a Christian involves certain things. First of all, it requires skills. We need to learn how to use the plow and how to get the oxen to move. The field is not going to get plowed if we don't know what to do with the plow. In the same way, a Christian has to learn how to serve God. The most basic thing he needs to do is to study the word of God. A true Christian is someone who attends to God's word. He likes to get his teeth into the word of God because he wants to know what he should do to serve God effectively.

In those days, plows were pulled by a number of oxen. In 1 Kings 19:19, we read that Elisha was plowing behind twelve pairs of oxen. He must have been using a very big and heavy plow if he needed twelve pairs of oxen to pull it. You see, we don't have the strength to pull the plow. Our job is simply to guide the plow. Likewise, in serving God, we don't use our own strength. It is God who provides the power. It is God who 'gives the increase.' Our responsibility is to guide the plow in the right direction.

This takes us to the question of what exactly we are called to do. What is the plow that we put our hand to? Think about a plow. What does it look like and what does it do to the soil? A plow is a large agricultural tool that has two poles. One pole goes over the back of the animals. The other pole goes into the ground. It has a hook or a blade in it. The whole thing looks very much like a cross. There is the bar that goes across the animals and there is a perpendicular bar that goes into the ground. So when you look at a plow, it looks like a cross. The Lord Jesus deliberately uses this picture to show that putting our hand to the plow is like taking hold of the cross. It is putting our hand to the cross. And to take up the cross is to live a sacrificial life. In other words, becoming a Christian is a call to the sacrificial life as we take up our cross and follow Christ.

Plowing and sowing

What does the plow do? It causes the ground to turn over. What is the ground, the field? In Matthew 13:38, the Lord tells us that the field is the world. This world is the field that we are plowing. How do we plow? Well, we put this plow, this cross, into the ground. And we let the oxen pull it. Then all the soil is turned over. Everything is turned upside down. This is exactly what was said of the apostles in Acts 17:6. *These who have **turned the world upside down** have come here too.* Therefore

when we live the kind of life to which we are called, we will make a mark in this world. By our cross-centered lives, we are turning everything upside down.

If you sow the seed without first plowing the field, nothing will grow because the soil is too hard. The seed cannot penetrate it. The ground has to be turned over before the sowing of the seed can take place. In the same way, the kind of life that we live in being committed to Christ is what makes a mark upon the non-Christian. A verbal profession of faith alone does not leave any mark upon anybody. You will make an impression on the non-Christians when you live the life of the cross, when you live the sacrificial life, the Christ-centered life. Your life becomes like a plow, guided by your hands, your mind and your heart. You plow through the earth, turning everything upside down. This prepares the heart of the non-Christian for the preaching of the word of God. And because you have plowed the field, later on, the seed that will be sown in that person's life will take root and grow.

Notice that the imagery of sowing seed in the Bible is often employed in relation to preaching. Paul tells Timothy to 'preach the word of God, in season and out of season (2Timothy 4:2),' using the picture of sowing. The Christian should sow at any time of the year, not just in the spring. But he must first plow the field. Our life must be like a plow that goes through the heart of non-Christians, turning over the hard and stony ground. In this way, their heart can become receptive to the word of God. Then somebody else may come later and sow the seed. Or perhaps, you may even drop some seed in there. And who knows? Maybe one day it will bring forth fruit for God. You and I are called to be people who plow for God. The world will not be saved because we are good at talking. The world will be saved when people see God's power in our lives, the power that, like the plow, turns the ground over.

We need to realize that in plowing through someone's life, living the Christlike life, we may upset a lot of people. They may think that we are too extreme, too single minded, too obsessed with the idea of plowing a straight furrow right through, refusing to turn to the left or to the right. But that's okay. Remember that no plow has ever done its job that did not 'upset' all the ground underneath. Christians should not be afraid of upsetting people for the glory of God. When you serve the Lord, you may upset your mother, your father, your sister, your brother or your friends. They may all be angry with you. But keep in mind that unless they are upset, they may never be open to God's word. They may never come to the Lord.

A total commitment

We have seen so far what it means to put one's hand to the plow. We have seen that the plow is the cross in our life. In living a committed sacrificial life, we make a mark upon the world. But some Christians go through the world and never leave any mark of goodness in their way. For what reason? Because they look back. 'No one who looks back is fit for the kingdom.'

Notice that we are talking here about Christians, not about non-Christians. Putting the hand to the plow is a commitment. The non-Christian has never made any commitment to Jesus. He has never put his hand to the plow. He has never taken hold of the cross. If you come so far as to put your hand to the plow and you are still looking back, you will prove thereby that you are not fit for the kingdom.

'Looking back.' In the Greek text, this verb is a present participle which expresses a continuous action. 'If any man puts his hand to the plow and keeps looking back, this person is not fit for the kingdom.' It is not just an occasional glance at the back. He is constantly looking back.

Why does a person constantly look back? Because his heart is still back there. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. What is there to look back to if there is nothing that attracts your attention? There is no reason to look back if there is nothing that attracts your heart. By God's grace, the Israelites came out of Egypt after many years of slavery. But where was their heart after the exodus? Back in Egypt. They came physically out of Egypt, yes, but their heart was still in Egypt.

They were always complaining that they had nothing to eat in the wilderness and that back in Egypt, at least they could eat reasonably well. They kept looking back to Egypt.

A person may have become some sort of a Christian, but if he keeps looking back at the old life, it shows that his heart has not separated from the world. His heart has never left the attachment to the old values. So here is the warning. It is not enough to make a commitment. It is not enough to put the hand to the plow. The commitment must be total. We must not look back. The picture that Jesus is using is one of total dedication to a task. If we want to plow a straight furrow, we don't look back. Our eyes must look ahead all the time. We don't allow distractions and disruptions to interrupt our attention. For Jesus, discipleship is an all-consuming priority in terms of the constancy of a person's allegiance. Either our commitment is total or it will not be acceptable.

Not suitable

That is why Jesus says that a man who commits himself to follow Him and looks back during the journey is not suitable for the kingdom. This statement is one of judgment. The issue is not only how a person serves effectively. It is also a matter of salvation.

The word 'fit' (*euthetos*) refers to being 'suitable' or 'usable.' It is found in only two other places in the NT: (1) in Luke 14:35, it is used of salt that has lost its flavor; (2) and in Hebrews 6:7, it is used of herbs that are useful. In both cases, they are found in the context of God's judgment.

Let's take a look at Luke 14:35. The Lord uses the picture of salt to teach about discipleship. He compares the Christian to salt. He says that salt that has lost its saltiness is of no value. It is not suitable (*euthetos*) for anything. What do we do with it? *It is thrown out*. So too the saltless disciple is 'thrown away.' Failure to pursue discipleship can indicate that faith is not really present (even though it was thought to be) or it can indicate spiritual rebellion. In either case, the result is the same: the person is excluded from the kingdom of heaven. Saltless salt then becomes an object of judgment.

In Hebrews 6:7, the Christian community is compared to a land that receives frequent rain and is cared for by God. A land that produces useful (*euthetos*) herbs, useful crops, receives God's blessing. But if these people should become apostate, they would be like a field which was well watered and cultivated, but which then produced only worthless thorns and thistles. The end of a field that produces nothing but weeds is to be set on fire. *It ends up being burned*. Professing Christians whose lives produce only the equivalent of weeds will face the judgment of God.

That you may be considered worthy of the kingdom

Why does a person put his hand to the plow and look back? We already mentioned one reason: because his heart is still back there in the world. Here is another reason: because of the persecutions that he has to endure.

In serving the Lord, in plowing up the field, we have to expect persecutions. We will face many trials. In fact, in 2Thessalonians 1:5, Paul says that persecution is a clear sign of God's coming judgment. This is an interesting verse for our lesson because Paul is saying virtually the same thing as the Lord Jesus.

In v. 4, he has been speaking about the persecution that believers at Thessalonica were enduring on account of their Christian profession. *Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.*

And then he says this in v. 5. *This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment.* You see, the fact that the Thessalonian church was persecuted was an evidence that there will be a future judgment. But Paul says something more. *This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that* (now, notice carefully these words. So that...) ***you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.*** As the result of your affliction, that you may be considered 'fit' for the kingdom of God. Here you have the same idea. Being fit for the kingdom is equivalent to being worthy of the kingdom.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we will merit heaven by our sufferings. It does not mean that a believer is saved because he remains faithful through the sufferings of his life. No one is worthy on his own account. It does mean however that your steadfastness in the midst of your afflictions shows that you have the characteristics to which God has promised salvation. When we suffer in this world and we endure through the suffering, we prove that we are truly a man or woman of God, worthy to dwell in heaven. The negative side of this is found in Jesus' words, that a man who, having put his hand to the plow, looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God. He shows that he is not worthy to enter heaven.

From justification to sanctification

There is a spiritual principle that is important to understand here. A Christian cannot say, 'I have received God's pardoning grace. The way I behave now doesn't matter anymore. Don't force me to change.' If a professing Christian does not live like a Christian, he proves to be unworthy of eternal life. There is an inseparable bond between God's forgiveness and our conduct. From justification, there must be a corresponding conduct. If our conduct does not match our calling to live the Christian life, then we will not be fit for the kingdom of God.

This is the situation that we find in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The servant was forgiven and his master expected that he would deal with his debtor in the same as his master dealt with him. But he did not live the life that was expected of him. He did not forgive and therefore his conduct has proven himself unfit for the kingdom of God. He was made to repay the original debt that he owed.

What kind of person is fit for the kingdom? It is the disciple who is totally committed. And the person who is totally committed does not discuss the question of looking back. He puts his hand to the plow, never to look back to the way life was before he came to follow Jesus. He says, like Paul, 'I have laid my hand to the plow and I press forward toward the mark of my high calling in Christ. No matter how tough the going will be, I have no thought of looking back.' This is the standard of dedication that Jesus expects from His disciples.